

'Constituent assembly a slow boat to China'

JUSTICE Secretary Raul Gonzalez described the efforts by President Arroyo's allies in the House of Representative to amend the Constitution by bypassing the Senate in convening as constituent assembly (con-ass) as "a very slow boat to China."

Gonzalez, member of Mrs. Arroyo's Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi) party, believes the bid in the House to change the Constitution "has a hard road ahead of it. Whether you like it or not, someone will go to the Supreme Court. And how long will the Court rule? By that time the candidates will be filing their certificates of candidacy already."

The DOJ chief said he is specifically concerned about the lack of cooperation from the Senate in moves to amend the Charter.

"Whatever interpretation we give, the reality is we are a bicameral figure. The Constitution talks about bicameral Congress although there are some provisions that talk about unicameral voting," he said.

He said it would be unlikely that there could be an amended Charter before 2010.

Last Wednesday, April 22, some 175 congressmen, led by Speaker Prospero Nograles, filed a resolution that would have "members of Congress" convening as a con-ass to amend the Constitution.

Though Nograles and Majority Leader Arthur Defensor are the lead signatories of Resolution 1109, opponents said the measure is clearly the handiwork of Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte, president of Mrs. Arroyo's Kampi.

It contains all of Villafuerte's arguments for convening "members of Congress," reportedly aimed at bypassing the Senate on Cha-cha.

Resolution 1109 was referred last night to the House committee on constitutional amendments, chaired by another signatory, La Union Rep. Victor Ortega.

Nograles is the principal author of another resolution (No. 737) on which the House has started floor debates.

His proposal seeks to amend Article XII, Sections 2 and 3 of the Constitution to allow full foreign participation in the exploitation of natural resources and ownership of agricultural land.

Nograles said Resolution 737 would be sent to the Senate for its own consideration after the House approves it.

United front vs Cha-cha

Senators called for a united front against Cha-cha as House members signed a resolution to convene a con-ass even without the Senate.

They said various sectors of society must come together as they refused to believe that Malacañang did not have anything to do with the Cha-cha move in the House.

They said the Palace could even try to influence the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and the Supreme Court (SC) to decide in favor of Cha-cha and protect "the selfish motives of President Arroyo and other elective officials who would not want to leave even after the end of their tenure in 2010."

Senators Francis Pangilinan, Francis Escudero, Richard Gordon, Loren Legarda, and Manuel Roxas II agreed that there seemed to be no let-up in the final push for Cha-cha.

"Those pushing for an illegal Cha-cha, it appears, are willing to do anything unfair or foul to achieve their self-serving goals," Pangilinan said.

Escudero, chairman of the Senate committee on constitutional amendments, criticized the Comelec for playing into the hands of Cha-cha proponents by delaying the proclamation of the new party-list representatives as ordered by the SC.

"The Cha-cha proponents could take this opening to railroad their long-planned agenda to extend their stay in power," Escudero said.

He had earlier hailed the SC decision in Banat vs Comelec, saying it virtually killed the plot by administration allies to change the Constitution through a con-ass since it would raise the number of votes required to pass the proposal.

A day after saying the poll body would abide

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First Gentleman sister becomes 4th presidential relative at House

by DELON PORCALLA
Philstar.com

THERE will be one more Arroyo in the House of Representatives once the Commission on Elections (Comelec) pushes through with the proclamation of 32 new party-list representatives.

First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo's younger sister, Ma. Lourdes Arroyo of party-list Kasangga, is set to become the fourth in her clan to take a seat in the current Congress.

But her proclamation—and that of the others—would have to wait pending clarification from the Supreme Court on the formula it used in determining the number of new seats of party-list representatives, Comelec Chairman Jose Melo said.

Lourdes was among 14 sectoral representatives who paid a courtesy call on Speaker Prospero Nograles recently.

The sister-in-law of President Arroyo was evasive at first, but eventually opened up to express her elation at the SC decision allowing the proclamation of additional party-list representatives.

"We are very happy with the ruling. We worked so hard for this. We will see what we can do to provide livelihood," she said.

Her group, she said, advocates the interest of micro-entrepreneurs "who should not be paying taxes."

She also told reporters that "only members of Kasangga" would defend Mrs. Arroyo whenever criticisms against her arise.

Pressed for her take on Charter amendments, allegedly aimed at extending all of her family members' terms beyond 2010, Lourdes played it safe, saying the issue needs the consent of her constituents.

"I have to consult my constituents. What is important is not what I want but what is good for small entrepreneurs, for the members of Kasangga. I will consult with them, I will study all the resolutions that they (lawmakers) have passed," she said.

The three other Arroyos in the 238-member House are her brother Ignacio (Iggy) of Negros Occidental, and her nephews Juan Miguel (Mikey) of Pampanga and Diosdado (Dato) of Camarines Sur.

Former Senate president Franklin Drilon earlier disclosed that President Arroyo, whose term ends in June 2010, intends to run for a congressional seat in her hometown in Pampanga and later on run for prime minister.

The other would-be lawmakers who met with Nograles were columnist Jonathan de la Cruz of Abakada, Darly Grace Abayon of Angat Tayo, Leonardo Montemayor of Aba-Ako, Teodoro Lim of United Movement Against Drugs (UNI-Mad);

Domingo Espina of Coconut Federation (Cocofed), Ranulfo Canonigo of Kapatiran ng Naka Kulong na Walang Sala (Kakusa), Pastor Alcover of Alliance for Nationalist Advancement and Democracy, Catalina Pizzaro of Arts, Business and Sciences (ABS);

Lorenzo Cadsawan and Roger Federezo of Filipinos for Peace Justice and Progress Movement (FPJPM), Salvador Britanico of Banat, Godofredo Arquiza of Senior Citizens, and Roy Ribo of Alliance of Rural Concerns (ARC).

The Speaker instructed House Secretary-General Marilyn Barua Yap to schedule an orientation meeting, possibly in the first week of May, for the new members.

Nograles expressed his wish that the new lawmakers would join the majority but "they are free to make their choice because the House is a free country."

SC clarification

Melo said the SC needs to clarify its ruling because it used a different figure in its computation.

"We were very eager and ready to have the proclamation. We were preparing the resolution for proclamation. But when it comes to figures, there was a discrepancy. So we want this clarified," Melo said.

The SC used 15 million—the number of votes cast for party-list polls in 2007—in computing the votes while the Comelec used 16 million. ■

Palace can't interfere with Congress on Cha-cha

MALACAÑANG last April 24 said it respects the independence of the House of Representatives and it would not interfere with the goings on in Congress. Deputy Presidential Spokesman Anthony Golez was referring to the charter change initiatives in Congress.

He said "we would leave it to the wisdom of the members of the House because they would also know if it would lead into that. We respect the right of every member of the House to voice out his/her opinion and to fulfill their mandate as members of the House."

He stressed anew that the Palace is not talking about Cha-cha at all. (PND)



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